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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 000465

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN/BRIGHAM

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PM](#) [POL](#) [SPECIALIST](#)

SUBJECT: LA DONA HITS PANAMA'S AIRWAVES. PANAMA ELECTION  
COUNTDOWN #4: 9 WEEKS TO GO

REF: A. PANAMA 0076

[B](#). PANAMA 0352

[C](#). PANAMA 0417

Fifth ballot refuses to die

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[1](#). (U) While a political cartoon in a Panama daily depicted the fifth ballot's funeral, civil society refused to let the issue rest in peace. Criticism abounded in the wake of last week's Electoral Tribunal (ET) and Executive Branch insistence on not issuing a fifth ballot on constitutional reforms in the May 2004 elections. Both 1999 President of the National Counting Board Ricardo Lombana and widely known union leader Mariano Mena have attacked that decision and questioned the costs entailed by holding a future referendum on the issue versus issuing a fifth ballot this May. Maribel Jaen, Executive Director of the Catholic Church's Peace and Justice Commission, appears resigned to the fifth ballot's demise, at least for this May. Nonetheless, she asserted that regardless of the estimated \$6 million cost, Panamanians deserve the opportunity to decide the issue of constitutional reform through a referendum. Noting the millions of dollars that the GOP spent to promote last year's Miss Universe Pageant in Panama, Jaen insisted that the cost would be justified.

[2](#). (SBU) Civil society pressure led prominent Arnulfista legislator Jose Blandon Jr. to announce his willingness to consider constitutional reforms as proposed by opposition PRD-PP alliance. Blandon said he is willing to follow Article 308 of Panama's constitution provided that certain amendments are made to the proposed bill. (See Reftel A.) Blandon insists that the bill include changes in the procedure for appointing the Attorney General and the Solicitor General, two officials that the next President will appoint. Observers have noted that Blandon's move allows the Arnulfistas a certain peace of mind even if PRD frontrunner Martin Torrijos wins the May 2 election. Ironically, the Arnulfistas initially criticized the PRD-PP bill, proposing a fifth ballot instead. Perceiving the Legislative Assembly as entirely corrupt, civil society groups do not want that entity to make constitutional reforms.

"La Dona"

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[3](#). (U) Flying in the face of conventional wisdom that "nothing happens before Carnival", well-known publicist, songwriter and singer Pedrito Altamiranda rocked Panama's political calm before the 5-day Carnival holiday with his wildly popular new tune, "La Dona." Panamanians refer to President Moscoso as "La Dona" ("the stately old lady"). With lilting, highly danceable rhythm and biting humor Altamiranda satirizes Moscoso's trips overseas, lavish parties, love life, and contested Supreme Court appointments, among other things. Though he has not released his new CD, Altamiranda lent the song over the weekend of February 14-15 to a radio station popular among Panama's youth. After two days, "La Dona" became the most requested song ever.

[4](#). (SBU) The GOP has not officially censored the song, but DJs at the radio station revealed that the station's owners instructed them to stop playing it. Evidently the station does not want to lose revenue if Arnulfista presidential candidate Jose Miguel Aleman were to pull his political advertisements. Altamiranda paid a price too. Panama's Tourism Institute (IPAT) had decided at the end of 2003 that cancer victim Altamiranda would be honored during the official Carnival Queen's crowning ceremony; however, at the last minute, the organizers removed Altamiranda from the program. Carnival Commission authorities and Altamiranda both deny that the change was due to the song, but a presidential staffer confided that Moscoso's office

had placed a call to IPAT questioning their decision to honor Altamiranda.

#### Candidates take it easy during Carnival week

15. (U) Campaign activities dropped as expected during Carnival week when everyone in Panama City heads for the provinces to "carnavalear." Cambio Democratico Candidate Ricardo Martinelli, with a recent death in the family, decided to stay away from politics and carnival festivities this week. Solidarity candidate Guillermo Endara announced that he and his family would attend a religious retreat, but warned he would come back next week with a strong anti-corruption campaign. Arnulfista candidate Jose Miguel Aleman announced that he would spend time with his family and attend a popular Ash Wednesday Catholic mass in Las Tablas. Campaign frontrunner, Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) Candidate Martin Torrijos spent a couple of days at a beach house, but also visited several towns to take advantage of the crowds and sponsored the very popular water trucks to entertain the people during Carnival festivities. Torrijos was the most active of all the candidates.

#### Presidential ballots ready

16. (U) Electoral Tribunal officers announced that the first draft of the presidential ballot has been printed. Once the Electoral Magistrates clear the text, the print shop will proceed to print the final version. This announcement allows the Electoral Tribunal to publicly confirm that Panama's electoral process is on schedule.

#### Call to submit blank votes

17. (U) In an unexpected announcement, a previously unknown leftist group calling itself the "Unified Popular Movement" (MPU) has urged Panamanians to submit blank ballots during the May 2 elections or void their votes by selecting more than one candidate. Allegedly, MPU members are national university student leaders and professors, as well as workers. MPU organizers insist that none of the candidates will fulfill their electoral promises and have criticized all of them. Former President Endara, MPU charged was a puppet of then US Ambassador to Panama Deane Hinton during his 1989-2004 presidency. MPU criticized PRD-PP Martin Torrijos for his allegedly poor performance as Vice Minister of Government and Justice under the Perez Balladares administration and his role in telephone and electricity privatization. MPU referred to Arnulfista candidate Jose Miguel Aleman's government plan as a continuation of the current GOP. Finally, MPU criticized Cambio Democratico Candidate Ricardo Martinelli for having served in PRD and Arnulfista administrations.

18. (SBU) MPU's call spurred an immediate reaction by PRD-PP Martin Torrijos's First Vice Presidential candidate Samuel Lewis Navarro and another Torrijos supporter, former President of the Panamanian Chamber of Commerce, Manuel Jose Paredes. Both criticized MPU's position as irresponsible and encouraged people to study the candidates' platforms and to make an informed decision. Historically, the PRD has had links with leftist groups in Panama and even has a leftist wing within the party. Observers have noted that the firm responses from Lewis Navarro and Paredes, neither of them old guard PRD, illustrate differences among Torrijos' personal followers and party followers.